

Science and Engineering Advisory Council

Annual Report for 2006

The Science and Engineering Advisory Council (SEAC) faced an uncertain future in 2006. It responded by seeking out speakers who could educate its members on issues of major importance to the future of science at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and to technical staff members “in the trenches.”

Here is a brief summary of those speakers and their remarks.

January 10—Edmund J. Cunniffe Jr., a Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) expert on loan to LANL, spoke in response to SEAC’s 2005 white paper on purchasing. He said he found the white paper “thoughtful.” A copy of his written response showed that his proposals overlapped with SEAC’s recommendations in many places. He said he was looking at issues in the Supply Chain Management Division (SUP) and doing what he could to put in place processes that would “support good science.” He said that when it came to SUP, he valued three things above all else: compliance, good controls on cost, and customer service. The trick, he said, would be to determine how to balance the three.

January 24—Laboratory Director Robert W. Kuckuck spoke on the Laboratory transition, saying, “I think this transition is going to continue to be a confusing thing.” He emphasized, however, that it was not a hostile takeover. He said incoming Director Michael Anastasio’s No. 1 priority was people. As a result, Kuckuck said, he was optimistic about the future. Kuckuck accepted a copy of SEAC’s last 2005 document, entitled “Preserving Positive Qualities in a Time of Change,” and promised to share it with Anastasio.

February 7—Rajan Gupta spoke on the development and circulation of a grassroots document entitled “Assuming Responsibility for the Transition: Five Key Guiding Principles for Maintaining Scientific and Technological Excellence.” Gupta said he began working on the document as a result of the “angst in the corridor” among his colleagues who were discussing the future at LANL. He asked himself what he and other scientists wanted and what would make them happy and useful to the organization. His answers—including his conclusion that what scientists really want is to be allowed to work on challenging projects that will leave a legacy—became the basis for a document that drew many signatures from other Laboratory employees. Gupta said it is vital that working scientists at the Laboratory find ways to communicate with LANL leaders and spark positive action in response.

March 7—William C. Priedhorsky, deputy coordinator for the Los Alamos Fellows, spoke on the selection of Fellows and their dedicated efforts to promote and protect science at the Laboratory. The Fellows are an advisory panel to the Director, Priedhorsky said. Director G. Peter Nanos, for example, asked them to comment on the Laboratory shutdown and on the creation of the position of chief science officer. The voice of the Fellows is valuable because it tends to be respected by both management and staff. Currently, Priedhorsky said, the Fellows are involved in the question of how to evaluate scientific excellence.

April 4—In a telephone linkup with SEAC, Jeff Colvin, incoming president of the Society of Professional Scientists and Engineers at LLNL, spoke about his organization’s history, accomplishments, and goals. He said SPSE is a union affiliated with the University Professional and Technical Employees. SPSE has members on all nine University of California (UC) campuses and at the three national laboratories run by UC (in April 2006). It has about 12,000

members and focuses on “hiring and firing issues.” Colvin said SPSE was formed at a time when LLNL was facing layoffs (May 23, 1973). Since that time, he said, there have been no further layoffs at LLNL.

May 2—Terry Lowe, who was completing his tenure as leader of the Science and Technology Base Programs Division (STB), spoke on his own future (working on the development of metrics to measure scientific excellence), the future of STB (linked to science at the Laboratory), the future of SEAC (uncertain but in a stronger position because SEAC is written into Laboratory policy), and the future of science at the Laboratory (a future that could include far more work with LLNL).

May 16—Psychologist Thomas P. Locke, leader of the Laboratory counseling program, spoke on stress at LANL during the transition. He said uncertainty was the most difficult problem facing employees. He added that the people who had been at LANL the longest were suffering the most. He recommended that people under stress take special care of themselves, sleeping well, exercising more, trying not to get angry, and avoiding drinking or smoking too much.

June 13—In an unusually full program, *two* speakers addressed SEAC. 1) Cory Coll of the UC Office of the President proposed and sought comments on a well-funded, highly competitive doctoral-studies fellowship program to attract the best science and engineering students to UC campuses and encourage them to go to work at LANL or LLNL when they completed their educations. Research time spent at one of the laboratories would be a requirement of this \$35,000-per-student, 12-month program. 2) Kim Thomas, the new leader of STB, outlined the division’s work and goals. She said STB seeks “to be an integral part of enhancing how we do science and engineering at the Laboratory.” Mentoring of students and work with foreign nationals are among the major issues that STB is addressing.

June 27—Terry Wallace, principal associate director for Science, Technology, and Engineering, spoke on science and the transition, responding to many SEAC questions. Among his comments: He thinks the Lab will struggle financially for a while, but, “There are places we can save money.” He also expressed optimism about the future of science at Los Alamos. Asked about the future of SEAC, he said he had made no decision yet.

July 25—Chris Cantwell spoke on the LANL Barrier Removal Program. He said the program’s goal is to “eliminate real or perceived barriers to getting work done.” The program had been in operation about a month, he said, and had already received 252 issues and closed 152.

Lack of funding led to austerity measures that forced the cancellation of several meetings near the end of 2006.

September 19—SEAC devoted its last meeting of fiscal year 2006 to a discussion of its future. Members agreed to communicate via e-mail to develop a white paper stating the reasons why SEAC is a good deal for the Laboratory and should be continued and supported by a writer-editor. They also agreed to meet on October 31—when the Laboratory budget should be in hand—to assess whether SEAC will be continuing.